

# USAID / BANGLADESH: CHILD LABOR SUMMARY

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

Of the estimated 16 million children in Bangladesh aged 10 to 14, over 6.8 million are working children. Forty-one percent of this group is girls. Children are engaged in over 300 different types of work activities of which 49 are considered harmful to their physical and/or mental well being. Intolerable forms of child labor, as categorized by the International Labor Organization (ILO), are domestic service, slavery or near slavery, hazardous occupations, and sexual exploitation. All of these forms are practiced in Bangladesh. Although the law prohibits labor by children, including forced or bonded labor, these practices widely occur. Enforcement of existing laws is inadequate.



Photo by: Shehzad Nooran / UNICEF

A 7-year old girl breaks bricks that will be used for construction.

Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries in the world with about 45 million “very poor” people, (as measured by the Cost of Basic Needs method). In 1996, 48 percent of the people of Bangladesh did not consume enough food to obtain their minimum caloric intake recommended for good health, and thus were below what is called the absolute poverty line in most countries. In 1997, 59.3 percent of children ages 6 to 59 months suffered from stunting, a long-term nutritional indicator of poverty. This grinding poverty has forced many families to put their children to work at a very young age.

Urban working children estimated at 2.5 million are found mostly in the informal working sector where they are often subjected to exploitative working conditions, as well as physical, social or emotional abuse. For many, insufficient pay with long hours of work, inadequate or no rest periods and little or no security of employment are the norm. Many children perform unpaid labor for their families, especially in the rural areas where families depend on the child's meager income to sustain the family. Many are abandoned by their families, others run away to the city because of abusive conditions, and some are even traded or sold.

## PROGRAM RATIONALE

Child labor continues to increase due to population growth, dire poverty in rural areas, and migration from rural to urban areas due to poverty, land erosion, inheritance laws and break-up of families. Child labor is a chronic problem that should be addressed because it is:

- a child rights issue
- a public health issue
- a basic education and literacy issue

A coordinated approach to the child labor situation is not evident. The root causes of child labor run deep and require a long-term approach to effectively impact. Organizations that have been active in Bangladesh in this sector include the ILO and UNICEF through the medium of education and skills training. Some NGOs offer smaller programs targeting child labor in specific industries and in the non-formal sector. They include the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS) which operates several schools for child laborers from the garment industry. Other groups approach child labor through poverty alleviation activities. The

Government of Bangladesh, which ratified the Child Rights Convention in 1990, has recently begun a new child labor project dealing with hazardous forms of child labor. Although these responses to the problem have brought some relief to targeted groups of children, they have not collectively led to a reduction in the incidence of child labor in Bangladesh.

## **PROGRAM STRATEGY**

U.S. involvement with child labor in Bangladesh increasingly became high profile with the Harkin Bill that called for the immediate ban on imports into the U.S. of goods fabricated or manufactured wholly, or in part, by child labor. This sent shock waves through the garment sector, Bangladesh's major export sector and foreign exchange earner. The most affected, however, were to be the children who knew no other way of life and who had few more appealing opportunities for earning income.

The U.S. Mission was instrumental in the July 1995 signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), UNICEF, and the ILO to eliminate child labor in the garment sector. Under this MOU, the garment sector pledged to eliminate child labor. The displaced child laborers have access to MOU-UNICEF-sponsored schools where they receive basic education, skills training, and a small monthly stipend. More than 10,000 former child laborers have gone through more than 300 UNICEF schools under the MOU.

Recognizing the need for resources to further address the pressing child labor issues, the USG and the GOB signed an agreement in 1998 to use some of the local currency proceeds from the sale of \$10 million of USDA wheat for child labor activities. In March 2000, the USG came to agreement with the GOB to a Ministry of Labor and Employment (MOLE) demonstration project to eradicate hazardous child labor. The project funded at \$2.6 million of Title I local currency funds provides the resources that are needed in order to formulate a national child labor policy, raise the awareness of parents and employers of the negative consequences of hazardous child labor, initiate sector specific programs to withdraw children from hazardous work, prevent the recruitment of children into these sectors, build the institutional capacity of the MOLE, and build partnerships with NGO, private sector, and international organizations that support the elimination of child labor. The targeted beneficiaries are approximately 10,000 children between the ages of 10-14, the general public and the Ministry itself.

Another USG initiative involves an ACILS project entitled Children-Child Labor Primary Education. This three year project is funded through P.L. 480 Title I funding at the local equivalent of \$304,783. This project contributes to the larger purpose of progressively eliminating child labor by providing education and other direct preventive action services and protective mechanisms to reduce exploitation of child workers and would-be child workers.

In March 2000, President Clinton announced an assistance package in Bangladesh to expand upon the progress already made to keep children out of factories and enrolled in school. Approximately \$6 million will fund the ILO International Program for the Elimination of Child Labor (IPEC) targeted to Bangladeshi children involved in exploitative or hazardous industries. Approximately 30,00 children now working in the construction, shrimp, and leather industries, on tea plantations, as cigarette and glass bangles makers, or as domestic servants, scavengers, transport helpers and weavers will be able to go from work to school under this program.

USAID's strategy to program child labor activities is still under revision. The Democracy and Governance Team hopes to have an intermediary organization in place by early 2001 to respond to the child labor issue.

## **ASSESSMENT**

Child labor is a long-term development problem that will not be resolved with short-term activities. A great deal of work remains to be done to respond in an effective manner to the child labor problem and its root causes. The U.S. Mission is committed to alleviating child labor in Bangladesh and will continue to seek ways to do so over time.